

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at the American Legion National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina

August 26, 2014

The President. Thank you so much. Please, everybody, have a seat. Hello, Legionnaires!

Audience members. Hello!

The President. I want to thank Commander Dellinger for the introduction, but more importantly, for your service in the Army. And as you conclude your tenure as commander, thank you for your tireless commitment to America's veterans.

I want to thank the entire leadership team for welcoming me here today, including your national adjutant, Dan Wheeler; your executive director in Washington, Peter Gaytan; Nancy Brown-Park, all the spouses, daughters—[*applause*]*—hey!*—sisters of the Auxiliary; and the Sons of the American Legion. And let me say that I join you in honoring the memory of a friend to many of you, an Army veteran and a great Legionnaire from North Carolina, Jerry Hedrick.

To Senators Richard Burr and Kay Hagan, Mayor Dan Clodfelter: Thank you for welcoming us to the great State of North Carolina and to Charlotte and for your great support of our troops and our veterans.

And I do have to mention the presence of Boys Nation, Matthew Ellow, from Lacey's Spring, Alabama. I welcomed Matthew and all the incredible young people of Boys and Girls Nation to the White House last month. I was running a little bit late, so they just started singing, filling the White House with patriotic songs. And then they sang Happy Birthday to me, so I was pretty moved. And they're a tribute to the Legion and to our country.

Now, I brought with me today our new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Bob McDonald. And for those of you who are not aware, Bob is one of America's most accomplished business leaders. He comes from a military family. He excelled at West Point, served as an Army Airborne Ranger, so he's got a reputation for jumping into tough situations. [*Laughter*] And he's hit the ground running, visiting hospitals and clinics across the country, hearing directly from veterans and helping us change the way VA does business. And by the way, Washington doesn't agree on much these days, but he got confirmed 97 to 0. People understand he's the right man for the job. He has my full support. And, Bob, I want to thank you for once again serving your country.

It's an honor to be back with the American Legion. In the story of your service, we see the spirit of America. When your country needed you most, you stepped forward. You raised your right hand; you swore a solemn oath. You put on that uniform and earned the title you carry to this day, whether soldier, sailor, airman, marine, coastguardsman.

Among you are proud veterans of World War II, of Korea, of Vietnam, of Desert Storm and the Balkans, and our newest veterans, from Iraq and Afghanistan. Across the generations, you served with honor. You made us proud. And you carry the memory of friends who never came home: our fallen, our prisoners of war, those missing in action, heroes that our Nation can never forget.

When you took off that uniform, you earned another title, the title of veteran. And you never stopped serving. As Legionnaires, you put on that cap, wore that emblem—"for God and country"—and took care of one another, making sure our veterans receive the care and the benefits that you've earned and deserve.

And just as you defended America over there, you helped build America here at home, as leaders and role models in your communities, as entrepreneurs and business owners, as champions for a strong national defense. You helped the United States of America become what we are today: the greatest democratic, economic, and military force for freedom and human dignity that the world has ever known.

Now, these are challenging times. I don't have to tell you that. Around the world as well as here at home. You turn on the TV, and we're saturated with heartbreaking images of war and senseless violence and terrorism and tragedy. And it can be easy to grow cynical or give in to the sense that the future we seek is somehow beyond our reach. But as men and women who have been tested like few others, you should know better. You know that cynicism is not the character of a great nation. And so even as we face, yes, the hard tasks of our time, we should never lose sight of our progress as a people or the strength of our leadership in the world.

Think about it. Six years after the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression—in some ways, the crisis had the potential of being worse than the Great Depression—thanks to the decisions we made to rescue our economy, thanks to the determination of the American people, we are stronger at home. Over the past 53 months, our businesses have added nearly 10 million new jobs, the longest streak of private sector job creation in American history. Construction and housing are rebounding. Our auto industry and manufacturing are booming. Our high school graduation rate is at a record high. More young people are earning their college degrees than ever before. Millions more Americans now have quality, affordable health care. We've cut the deficit by more than half. And now we have to sustain this momentum so more people share in this progress, so our economy works for every working American.

And just as we're stronger at home, the United States is better positioned to lead in the 21st century than any nation on Earth. It's not even close. We have the most powerful military in history. That's certainly not close. From Europe to Asia, our alliances are unrivaled. Our economy is the most dynamic. We've got the best workers. We've got the best businesses. We have the best universities and the best scientists. With our domestic energy revolution, including more renewable energy, we're more energy independent. Our technologies connect the world. Our freedoms and opportunities attract immigrants who "yearn to breathe free." Our founding ideals inspire the oppressed across the globe to reach for their own liberty. That's who we are. That's what America is.

And moreover, nobody else can do what we do. No other nation does more to underwrite the security and prosperity on which the world depends. In times of crisis, no other nation can rally such broad coalitions to stand up for international norms and peace. In times of disaster, no other nation has the capabilities to deliver so much so quickly. No nation does more to help citizens claim their rights and build their democracies. No nation does more to help people in the far corners of the Earth escape poverty and hunger and disease and realize their dignity. Even countries that criticize us, when the chips are down and they need help, they know who to call. They call us. That's what American leadership looks like. That's why the United States is and will remain the one indispensable nation in the world.

Now, sustaining our leadership, keeping America strong and secure, means we have to use our power wisely. History teaches us of the dangers of overreaching and spreading ourselves

too thin and trying to go it alone without international support or rushing into military adventures without thinking through the consequences. And nobody knows this better than our veterans and our families—our veteran families, because you're the ones who bear the wages of war. You're the ones who carry the scars. You know that we should never send America's sons and daughters into harm's way unless it is absolutely necessary and we have a plan and we are resourcing it and prepared to see it through. You know the United States has to lead with strength and confidence and wisdom.

And that's why, after incredible sacrifice by so many of our men and women in uniform, we removed more than 140,000 troops from Iraq and welcomed those troops home. It was the right thing to do. It's why we refocused our efforts in Afghanistan and went after Al Qaida's leadership in the tribal regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, driving the Taliban out of its strongholds and training Afghan forces, which are now in the lead for their own security. In just four months, we will complete our combat mission in Afghanistan and America's longest war will come to a responsible end. And we honor every American who served to make this progress possible—[*applause*]*—every single one, especially the more than 2,200 American patriots who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan to keep us safe.*

And now, as Afghans continue to work towards the first democratic transfer of power in their history, Afghan leaders need to make the hard compromises that are necessary to give the Afghan people a future of security and progress. And as we go forward, we'll continue to partner with Afghans so their country can never again be used to launch attacks against the United States.

Now, as I've always made clear, the blows we've struck against Al Qaida's leadership don't mean the end to the terrorist threat. Al Qaida affiliates still target our homeland; we've seen that in Yemen. Other extremists threaten our citizens abroad, as we've seen most recently in Iraq and Syria. As Commander in Chief, the security of the American people is my highest priority, and that's why, with the brutal terrorist group ISIL advancing in Iraq, I have authorized targeted strikes to protect our diplomats and military advisers who are there.

And let me say it again: American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq. We'll not allow the United States to be dragged back into another ground war in Iraq. Because ultimately, it is up to the Iraqis to bridge their differences and secure themselves. The limited strikes we're conducting have been necessary to protect our people and have helped Iraqi forces begin to push back these terrorists. We've also been able to rescue thousands of men and women and children who were trapped on a mountain. And our airdrops of food and water and medicine show American leadership at our best. And we salute the brave pilots and crews who are making us proud in the skies of Iraq every single day.

And more broadly, the crisis in Iraq underscores how we have to meet today's evolving terrorist threat. The answer is not to send in large-scale military deployments that overstretch our military and lead for us occupying countries for a long period of time and end up feeding extremism. Rather, our military action in Iraq has to be part of a broader strategy to protect our people and support our partners to take the fight to ISIL.

So we're strengthening our partners: more military assistance to Government and Kurdish forces in Iraq and moderate opposition in Syria. And we're urging Iraqis to forge the kind of inclusive Government that can deliver on national unity and strong security forces and good governance that are ultimately going to be the antidote against terrorists. And we're urging countries in the region and building an international coalition, including our closest allies, to support Iraqis as they take the fight to these barbaric terrorists.

And today our prayers are with the Foley family in New Hampshire as they continue to grieve the brutal murder of their son and brother Jim. But our message to anyone who harms our people is simple: America does not forget. Our reach is long. We are patient. Justice will be done. We have proved time and time again we will do what's necessary to capture those who harm Americans, to go after those who harm Americans.

And we'll continue to take direct action where needed to protect our people and to defend our homeland. And rooting out a cancer like ISIL won't be easy, and it won't be quick. But tyrants and murderers before them should recognize that kind of hateful vision ultimately is no match for the strength and hopes of people who stand together for the security and dignity and freedom that is the birthright of every human being.

So even as our war in Afghanistan comes to an end, we will stay vigilant. We will continue to make sure that our military has what it needs. And as today's generation of servicemembers keeps us safe, and as they come home, we also have to meet our responsibilities to them, just as they meet their responsibilities to America.

When I was here at the Legion 3 years ago, I said that the bond between our forces and our citizens has to be a sacred trust and that for me, for my administration, upholding our trust with our veterans is not just a matter of policy, it is a moral obligation.

And working together, we have made real progress. Think about it. Working with the Legion and other veterans service organizations, we've been able to accomplish historic increases to veterans funding. We've protected veterans health care from Washington politics with advanced appropriations. We've been able to make VA benefits available to more than 2 million veterans who didn't have them before, including more Vietnam vets who were exposed to agent orange. We've dedicated major new resources for mental health care. We've helped more than 1 million veterans and their families pursue their education under the post-9/11 GI bill.

And moreover, as the Legion and other veterans groups have said, once veterans get in the door, the care you receive from the VA is often very good. The specialized care is among the best in the world. And many of the hard-working folks at the VA are veterans themselves, veterans serving veterans. And we can never thank them enough for their good work.

But what we've come to learn is that the misconduct we've seen at too many facilities—with long wait times and veterans denied care and folks cooking the books—is outrageous and inexcusable.

As soon as it was disclosed, I got before the American people, and I said we would not tolerate it. And we will not. And I know the Legion's been on the frontlines, fanning out across the country, helping veterans who've been affected. And I know Bob is going to give you an update on the actions that we're taking. But what I want you to know, directly from me, is that we're focused on this at the highest levels. We are going to get to the bottom of these problems. We're going to fix what is wrong. We're going to do right by you, and we are going to do right by your families. And that is a solemn pledge and commitment that I'm making to you here.

Already, we're making sure that those responsible for manipulating or falsifying records are held accountable. We're reaching out to veterans—more than a quarter million so far—to get them off wait lists and into clinics. We're moving ahead with reforms at the Veterans Health Administration. And to help get that done, you supported and Congress passed and I signed into law the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, which means more

resources to help the VA hire more doctors and nurses and staff. It means if you live more than 40 miles from a VA facility or your VA doctors can't see you fast enough, we'll help you go to a doctor outside the VA.

And we're instituting a new culture of accountability. Bob doesn't play. Bob likes to recall a cadet prayer from West Point, which should be the ethos of all of us: "Choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong." And with the new legislation that I signed into law, Bob and the VA now have the authority to more quickly remove senior executives who don't meet our high standards. If you engage in unethical practices or cover up a serious problem, you should be and will be fired.

And by the way, if you blow the whistle on higher-ups because you've identified a legitimate problem, you shouldn't be punished, you should be protected.

So my bottom line is this: Despite all the good work that the VA does every day, despite all the progress that we've made over the last several years, we are very clear eyed about the problems that are still there. And those problems require us to regain the trust of our veterans and live up to our vision of a VA that is more effective and more efficient and that truly puts veterans first. And I will not be satisfied until that happens.

And we're in the midst of a new wave of veterans, more than a million servicemembers returning to civilian life. So we have to do more to uphold that sacred trust not just this year or next year, but for decades to come. We're going to have to stay focused on the five priorities that I outlined last year. And I just want to reiterate them for you just so you know what it is that we're committing to.

Number one, we need to make sure our veterans have the resources you deserve. And the new funding we just helped—we just passed with the help of Senators Burr and Kay, that helps. But as you know, it's not enough. Even in these tough fiscal times, I've therefore proposed another increase in veterans funding for next year. And I'll continue to resist any effort to exploit the recent problems at the VA to turn veterans health care into a voucher system. We don't need vouchers. You need VA health care that you have earned and that you can depend on. We need to make the system work.

Second, we need to make sure veterans are actually getting the health care you need when you need it. Reforming the VHA and more doctors and staff is a good step. But with this new wave of veterans, we've got to deliver the care our newest veterans need most. And that includes tailored care that treats our women veterans with respect and dignity. It means doing even more to help veterans from all wars who are struggling with traumatic brain injury and posttraumatic stress. And we have to end this tragedy of suicide among our troops and veterans. As a country, we can't stand idly by on such tragedy.

So we're doing even more—more than ever—more awareness, more outreach, more access to mental health care. So long as any servicemember or veteran is suffering or feels like they have nowhere to turn or doesn't get the support that they need, that means we haven't done enough. When we all know we need to do more. Veterans called for it. We heard you, which is why today I'm announcing 19 new executive actions to help improve mental health care for those American heroes and their families.

So just one example: We're expanding suicide prevention training across the military and the VA so colleagues and clinicians can spot the warning signs and encourage our troops and veterans to seek help. We'll improve access to care, with more peer support—veterans counseling veterans—at VA hospitals and clinics. We're calling on Congress to help us ensure

that our troops get coverage for mental health care that's on par with the coverage for other mental—medical conditions. And we're going to make it easier for servicemembers being treated for mental health conditions to continue their care as they transition to the VA, so automatically connecting them with the support they need, making sure they don't lose access to any medications they may be taking.

And maybe most of all, we're going to keep saying loud and clear to anyone out there who's hurting, it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help, it is a sign of strength. Talk to a friend. Pick up the phone. You are not alone. We are here for you. And every American needs to know, if you see someone in uniform or a veteran who is struggling, reach out and help them to get help. They were there for America. We now need to be there for them.

Our third priority: We have to keep attacking the disability claims backlog. Now, the good news is, since its peak last year, we've worked with you to slash the backlog by more than 50 percent. There had been a surge in the backlog in part because of an influx of new veterans, in part because we opened it up for folks who had PTSD, folks with agent orange symptoms. And then we had to work that backlog back down. The trend lines are good. But we don't just want those claims processed fast; we need to make sure they get processed right.

So we're going to keep at this until we end this backlog once and for all. And as we do, we're going to keep working to liberate you from those mountains of paper. We've got to move towards a paperless system, electronic health records that our troops and veterans can keep for life and then could cut down on some of the bureaucratic redtape so that you're getting the benefits that you've earned a little bit faster.

Number four, we need to uphold the dignity and rights of every veteran, and that includes ending the tragedy of homelessness among veterans. Again, we've got good news to report. Today I can announce that, working together over the last few years, we have been able to reduce the number of homeless veterans by one-third. And that means on any given night, there are 25,000 fewer veterans on the streets or in shelters. But we're not going to stop until every veteran who has defended America has a home in America. That's a basic commitment that we have to uphold.

And finally, we need to make sure our troops and veterans have every opportunity to pursue the American Dream. And that includes a home of their own. You know, under the law, our servicemembers are entitled to reduced mortgage rates, but the burden is on them to ask for it and prove they're eligible, which means a lot of folks don't get the low rates they deserve.

So today we're turning that around. We're announcing a new partnership in which some of America's biggest banks and financial institutions will simplify the process, proactively notify servicemembers who qualify for lower rates, and make it easier to enroll. In other words, we're going to help more of our troops and military families own their own home without a crushing debt.

We're also going to keep helping our troops transition to civilian life. Because of the work we've done together, if you already have a military truck driver's license, every State now waives the skills test so it's easier for you to get a commercial driver's license. And we're going to keep pushing more States to recognize the incredible skills and training of our veterans. If you could do a job in a war zone, if you're a medic in a war zone, you shouldn't have to go take nursing 101 to work in a hospital here in the United States. If you can handle million-dollar pieces of equipment in a war zone, that should count for something in getting certified back

here at home. If you can do the kinds of jobs so many of you have done in the most extreme circumstances, I'm pretty confident you can do that job right here at home.

To help our troops and veterans pursue their education, we worked with loan servicers to automatically cap interest rates on student loans to our servicemembers at 6 percent. For veterans going back to school under the post-9/11 GI bill, we'll keep standing up against dishonest recruiting and predatory practices that target and prey on you and your families. So far, about 6,000 colleges and universities have pledged to adhere to our principles of excellence, promising to do right by our veterans. And more than a thousand colleges and universities have adopted our "8 Keys" to make sure that they're truly welcoming veterans and helping them succeed on campus. And by the way, every school in America should join them. You should be proud if you're educating a veteran, and you should be doing right by them.

And we're going to keep helping our veterans find those private sector jobs worthy of your incredible talents. Our new online Veterans Employment Center is a single, one-stop shop connecting veterans and their spouses to more than 1.5 million jobs that are open right now. And we're joining with States and local leaders to identify nearly two dozen cities and regions with the most opportunities for veterans. And with Michelle and Dr. Jill Biden leading the call, America's businesses are joining forces to hire or train veterans and spouses, more than half a million so far and growing.

So veterans' unemployment is going down, and it's now actually lower than the national average. It was higher to begin with, and we have been driving it down. But we've got more to go, especially for our post-9/11 veterans. So we're going to keep saying to every business in America, if you want somebody who knows how to get the job done, no matter what the mission, hire a veteran. Hire a vet.

So fixing what's broken at the VA, ensuring the resources you deserve, delivering the health care that you've earned, eliminating the backlog, standing up for your rights and dignity, helping you realize the American Dream that you so honorably defended—these are our commitments to you. This is what we're focused on. This is what we can do together, especially as our war in Afghanistan comes to an end and we welcome home our newest veterans.

There are a lot of them here tonight. We salute Captain Scott Miller of Indiana, a proud Hoosier and a proud marine. In Afghanistan, he went out on dangerous patrols, traveling to remote villages, meeting with tribal elders, building trust, forging partnerships to push back insurgents. And here at the Legion, he continues to serve by encouraging businesses across America to give back to the veterans who defended our way of life and make our prosperity possible. So thank you, Scott. Where is Scott here today? We are proud of him. There he is.

We salute Master Sergeant Carol Barker of Greensboro, North Carolina. As a first sergeant of her medevac unit, she was responsible for more than a hundred troops, helped save the lives of our wounded warriors in those critical first hours when life so often hung in the balance. And here at the Legion, she continues to serve, helping homeless veterans come in off the streets and begin their lives anew with a roof over their heads. Thank you, Carol. Where's Carol?

We salute Sergeant Joe Grassi, who grew up just outside New York City. After his hometown was attacked on 9/11, he left his civilian job, he joined the Army. A squad leader in Afghanistan, he spent most of his time on the flight line, in the 120-degree heat, supplying our helicopter crews. And here at the Legion, he continues to serve, helping veterans complete their disability claims and raising his voice in Washington for a strong national defense,

because, he says, "some things are worth fighting for. America is worth fighting for." Thank you, Joe. We're proud of you. Thank you, sir.

So Scott, Carol, Joe—they're among the patriots here today who served in Afghanistan and Iraq. And I would ask all our post-9/11 generation veterans to stand if you are able and accept the thanks of a grateful nation. I ask these men and women to stand because the American people have to know that even as our war in Afghanistan comes to an end, our obligation to this generation of veterans has only just begun. And this cannot just be the work of Government and veterans groups alone. I want every American to take this commitment seriously. Please stand, post-9/11 generation, all of you who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. We're grateful for you.

This is not just a job of Government. It's not just a job of the veterans organizations. Every American needs to join us in taking care of those who've taken care of us. Because only 1 percent of Americans may be fighting our wars, but 100 percent of Americans benefit from that 1 percent. A hundred percent need to be supporting our troops. A hundred percent need to be supporting our veterans. A hundred percent need to be supporting our military families.

And everybody can do something. Every American. Every business. Every profession. Every school. Every community. Every State. All of us, as one American team. That's how we will truly honor our veterans. That's how we will truly say thank you. That's how we will uphold the sacred trust with all who've served in our name.

God bless you. God bless our veterans. God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:07 p.m. at the Charlotte Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Nancy Brown-Park, former national president, American Legion Auxiliary; Jerry Hedrick, commander, American Legion Post Number 8 in Lexington, NC, who died in Charlotte, NC, on August 25; Matthew Ellow, Alabama delegate and president, Boys Nation; and James W. Foley, a freelance journalist who was killed by members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) organization in Syria on August 19.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : American Legion, national convention in Charlotte, NC.

Locations: Charlotte, NC.

Names: Barker, Carol; Biden, Jill T.; Brown-Park, Nancy; Burr, Richard M.; Clodfelter, Daniel G.; Dellinger, Daniel M.; Foley, James W.; Gaytan, Peter; Grassi, Joe; Hagan, Kay; Hedrick, Jerry; McDonald, Robert A.; Miller, Scott; Obama, Michelle; Wheeler, Daniel S.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Economy, national : Improvement; Ellow, Matthew; Iraq : Iraqi military and security forces; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) organization; Iraq : Political unrest and violence; Iraq : Reconciliation efforts; Iraq : Security cooperation with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. assistance; North Carolina : President's visit; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : U.S. assistance; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Veterans : Access to health and medical care; Veterans : American Legion; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Disabled veterans; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans : Homelessness; Veterans : Job training and education assistance; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans : Suicide rate; Veterans : Unemployment and underemployment; Veterans

Affairs, Department of : Funding; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Home loan program;
Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Veterans Health
Administration.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400621.